

A Cross-Game Look at Transgender Representation in Video Games

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Abstract

Despite a history of tracking, analyzing, and discussing transgender representation in media, research on video games is often left out. In this project, I analyzed 63 games released from 1988–2019, and documented on the LGBTQ Game Archive as having transgender characters. A content survey revealed four overarching trends in how video games represent transgender characters (i.e., dysphoria/physical transition, mentally ill killers, trans shock/reveal, and ambiguity). I also demonstrated how transgender representation in video games manifests in similar ways to film and television. Three out of four trends in transgender representation have been repeatedly studied in media studies, but the fourth and largest trend, gender ambiguity, remains understudied. Research on transgender representation in video games mostly focuses on explicit representation. However, the findings show that despite the lack of explicit representations, transness is largely included in media in the form of gender ambiguity without explicitly being there.

Keywords

Transgender; representation; video game genre; content survey; LGBTQ; gender; gender ambiguity.

Press Start 2021 | Volume 7 | Issue 1

ISSN: 2055-8198

URL: <http://press-start.gla.ac.uk>



Press Start is an open access student journal that publishes the best undergraduate and postgraduate research, essays and dissertations from across the multidisciplinary subject of game studies. Press Start is published by HATII at the University of Glasgow.

Introduction

Like all representational media, video games are important to study, as representation provides groups with social recognition and an acknowledgement of their existence; if this recognition is confining or demeaning, it can cause real damage (Taylor, 1997). Dominant narratives can create stereotypes, which while not inherently “bad,” cause harm if they are the only narratives available about minority groups (Dyer, 2000). In the case of trans (encompassing any gender identity differing from the sex assigned at birth, such as transgender, non-binary, and gender non-conforming) representation, qualitative research in film and television has found several harmful tropes. Film and television generally portray transness as suffering (Cavalcante, 2013), place trans characters and stories on the periphery (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017), and use trans individuals as the butt of a joke (Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987). Quantitative research in film and television has found that trans representation is lacking in comparison to other LGBTQ groups, such as gay cisgender (identifying with the sex assigned at birth) men (GLAAD, 2019; GLAAD, 2020). The same lack has been found in video games (Mejeur, 2018; Shaw et al., 2019; Utsch et al., 2017).

This project utilized the LGBTQ Game Archive¹ to perform a content survey (Shaw et al., 2019) of 63 games released between 1988 and 2019 and documented as having trans characters. This sample is not representative of all games with trans content but is the largest available. After developing a codebook following Shaw et al. (2019) and performing two coding run-throughs, I found seven emergent trends, which I paired into four overarching trends:

1. Dysphoria/physical transition: video games portraying trans bodies and trans minds through a “wrong-body” narrative.
2. Mentally ill killers: video games representing trans people as dangerous and/or unstable because of their transness.
3. Trans shock/reveal: video games showing transness to the in-game characters and/or audience through the revelation of unexpected gender markers.
4. Ambiguity: video games leaving out explicit information about gender identity for trans-coded characters. Japanese games seem to have the most cases of gender ambiguity, but this may be due to an English bias in this project and the Archive, as both this study and the Archive come from a mostly Western perspective. Content may have changed in localization and/or may require additional analysis of original Japanese text which was not within the scope of this project.

As three out of the four trends in trans representation in video games are also found in film and television, video games are not that unique

¹ LGBTQ Game Archive: <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/>

from other media in terms of how trans representation manifests. However, [gender] ambiguity, the fourth and largest trend, is understudied in Western media and game studies, as most research tends to focus on explicit representations. Despite most of the same trends appearing in all three forms of media, research on trans representation in video games is lacking compared to film and television. Additionally, changes in the television media landscape that allow trans communities to come together to resist and challenge transphobia and transmisogyny (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017) mirror changes in independent game development, where trans creators are increasingly doing similar work (Anthropy, 2012b; Brice, 2017; Kopas, 2015).

Research on gender ambiguity in Western video games can help to establish similar research in Western film and television. There may be a wealth of representation ignored by only analyzing representation within content that explicitly mentions or states trans identity. Although gender ambiguity is understudied in Western video games scholarship, some authors have touched on it (Adams, 2018; Lawrence, 2018; Stang, 2019). This work has been done mostly on game series like *The Legend of Zelda* and *Mario*, but this study continues this conversation by showing the frequency of gender ambiguity in trans representation. As Shaw et al. (2019) have stated, it is hard to quantify queerness in video games, as it is often counted through actions, rather than identity. The same can be said for transness, as gender expression and gender identity can vary.

Literature Review

Researchers in communication and media studies have analyzed LGBTQ representation in various types of media (Benshoff & Griffin, 2006; Gross, 2001; Russo, 1987; Sender, 2004; Shaw & Friesem, 2016), building a strong foundation for examining current and future representations. It seems that media representations of LGBTQ people in general are improving, but within a framework that does not show the complexities of LGBTQ identities (GLAAD, 2019; GLAAD, 2020; Shaw, 2014). For example, media often shows LGBTQ characters by themselves or paired within a couple, rarely showing the communities those characters are a part of (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Copier & Steinbock, 2018; Russo, 1987; Shaw et al., 2019). Queerness is presented as "sameness" or as "being just like everyone else," flattening identities and lacking the political vigor and difference often associated with queerness (Cavalcante, 2013; Greer, 2013; Shaw, 2009). On the other hand, LGBTQ people are also seen as threats to order and stability, as media often portrays queerness as the monstrous or villainous "Other" (Benshoff, 1997; Halberstam, 2018). Although there is some improvement, it seems that dominant and often harmful narratives about LGBTQ people still plague media.

Research on film and television has delved deeper into trans representation. The literature on trans representation in media has found that it is increasing but that trans people are still less prevalent than other groups on television (GLAAD, 2019); while in film, no trans characters have been featured in major releases for three consecutive years (GLAAD, 2020). Trans representation in television often only includes trans women, specifically of the “Barbie” aesthetic; for this reason, trans men, non-binary individuals, and genderqueer characters remain largely invisible (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017). When trans representation in media does occur in more complex ways, it still often relies on narratives centered around suffering and violence (Cavalcante, 2013). Trans representation also often follows a “wrong-body model” (Bettcher, 2014), or transnormativity, i.e., the medicalization of transness (Vipond, 2015). Such representations reinforce the idea that trans bodies must adhere to cis aesthetics (Billard, 2019). Finally, in many narratives the monstrous or villainous “Other” is a psychotic crossdresser or a character who becomes completely unstable because of their gender identity.

Very little research has been done on trans representation in video games. Historical overviews about sex (Brathwaite, 2006) and gender (Graner Ray, 2004) in video games have been done (specifically with a focus on binary gender). Adams (2018), Lawrence (2018), and Stang (2019) have analyzed gender ambiguity/androgyny in *The Legend of Zelda* and *Mario* series and how it can be subversive and/or reinforce the gender binary and gender roles. Recent work has included trans identities in quantitative (Mejeur, 2018; Shaw et al., 2019; Utsch et al., 2017) and qualitative (Shaw & Friesem, 2016) analyses of game content. In their visualizations of gender in the LGBTQ Game Archive’s entries, Mejeur (2018) has found that “Other” and “Non-Binary” representation remained mostly unchanged throughout the 1980s–2000s. Shaw et al. (2019) have found that non-binary and intersex characters were underrepresented, while gender non-conforming and trans representation has increased over time (albeit all at much lower frequencies than other queer identities). On the other hand, Utsch et al. (2017) found that gender non-conforming representation increased until 2002, then decreased in following years, while binary and non-binary trans representations increased at a low and inconsistent rate. However, these three studies used different versions of the data set as all three drew from the LGBTQ Game Archive at different points in time. Any slight inconsistencies between all these studies can possibly be explained by this and the difference in categorization of certain groups. Shaw and Friesem (2016) have found that explicit trans and intersex representations were less common in games than LGB representations, with most of them appearing in more recent games. They also found that trans women appear much more often than trans men, that localization makes it difficult to define characters as trans, and that there is a great prevalence of gender nonconformity in games.

While studies on LGBTQ representation are necessary and important to the field of queer game studies, gender and sexuality manifest in very different ways. There has been a large focus on sexuality and binary gender, and there needs to be further research that examines transness in video games separately from queerness. Such an analysis is necessary to provide a foundational framework for analyzing trans themes in video games. There also needs to be a comparison of themes across other media to see how trans representation in video games may be unique. Analysis of trans representation in media has focused primarily on film and television, but video games could provide new ways of looking at trans representation or demonstrate that video games rely on similar narratives of representation as other media.

Methods

Using the LGBTQ Game Archive, the first scholarly database of queer content in video games, I performed a content survey (Shaw et al., 2019) to find emergent themes in games with trans-related content. This project defined trans-related content as content relating to identifying with a gender other than the sex assigned at birth. To do this, I looked at different types of content on the Archive, and how the Archive categorizes this content. The categories are as follows²: actions, artifacts, changes in localization, characters, easter eggs, homophobia/transphobia, locations, mentions, mods, queer games/narratives, relationships/romance/sex, and traits.

I initially paid attention to entries within trans-related categories (e.g., cross-dressing, non-binary gender customization, agender, gender non-conforming, non-binary or genderqueer, transgender, transphobia, and transgender sex workers) and decided whether they fit the definition of trans-related content in this project based on the producer's intention (rather than reading the content for transness). To do so, I looked for multiple instances of queerness in the game, or other indicators that would hint towards the producer intending to create a trans representation. For instance, cross-dressing (the action of wearing clothes of the opposite sex) entries were excluded because cross-dressing on the Archive is categorized specifically as an action (i.e., a player had to be able to make a character cross-dress). Usually, this occurred with cross-dressing quests where a cis male character dresses as a woman to complete an objective. I also excluded a few gender non-conforming options, specifically the ones focusing on cis characters' gender expression rather than their gender identity, as they tended to be effeminate cis gay male characters.

I used grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and a modified approach to a textual analysis, like Shaw et al.'s (2019) content survey,

² For more information on these categories, see the Category Descriptions page on the LGBTQ Game Archive: <https://lgbtqgamearchive.com/resources/category-descriptions/>.

to create and refine my codebook throughout the research process. While compiling my list of games with trans-related content, I took notes on common themes present in the sample. From these themes, I developed an initial codebook, forming 22 trends³ from my notes. Three primary categories were used to code the games: the country of origin, the game genre, and the decade during which the game was published. These were included because previous research on multiple forms of representation in video games (sexuality, race, gender) has shown differences across these primary categories (Chan, 2005; Leonard, 2004; Mejeur, 2018; Shaw et al., 2019, Šisler, 2008; Utsch et al., 2017). Genre was coded with six subcategories: action, action-adventure, adventure, RPG, simulation, and other.

After refining the codebook and performing a second run-through, I found that most of the trends I took note of while coding fell under other trends, and that many were just differing forms of transphobia. Then, I combined these trends. A few instances within the original trends did not fit into any other trends. However, they were not as prominent as these seven notable trends (i.e., themes that appeared across a number of games): ambiguity, dysphoria/trapped in the wrong body, physical transition, mental illness, killer, trans shock, and trans reveal. These are not mutually exclusive, as many games included content fitting multiple trends.

Results & Discussion

During the analysis, I started with general frequencies of country, genre, and decade, as well as the seven notable trends I mentioned above. I decided to condense these seven trends into four overarching trends because some of them appeared together frequently. For instance, the “dysphoria/trapped in the wrong body” trend and the “physical transition” trend both relate to how video games portray trans bodies and trans minds. Similarly, I paired the “mental illness” and “killer” trends together because of the way video games in this project mostly portrayed the two together; they also both relate to how video games related trans killers to gender dysphoria-related instability. The “trans shock” and the “trans reveal” trends are both ways transness is signalled in games, so I paired them together. The “ambiguity” trend appeared often enough for me to analyze it by itself. Using these four overarching trends of representation, I performed analyses of their frequency by country, genre, and decade. Some showed notable results and are discussed here. Throughout this section, I discuss characters that best exemplify these four overarching trends.

As shown in Table 1, most games in this study came from Japan and the United States. This was expected, as previous research has shown that

³ For more information on these trends, see my final codebook here: <https://www.dropbox.com/s/qmyl6co5ox45z6p/Trans%20Rep%20in%20Video%20Games%20Codebook%20FINAL.docx?dl=0>.

the sample of games from the LGBTQ Game Archive reflect this general trend in the overall production of video games (Shaw et al., 2019).

Country of Origin	Percentage of Games
Japan	41% (26)
United States	37% (23)
Other	22% (14) ⁴

Table 1. Frequencies of Games with Trans-Related Content by Country of Origin

Table 2 shows an increase in the number of games with trans content published over time (that being said, one must keep in mind that these numbers are not representative of the full amount of games with trans-related content published in those decades).

Decade of Release	Percentage of Games
1980s	3% (2)
1990s	17% (11)
2000s	40% (25)
2010s	40% (25)

Table 2. Frequencies of Games with Trans-Related Content by Decade of Release

Table 3 shows that there is a somewhat even distribution among genres, except for RPGs and other games. Specifically, RPGs included the most trans-related content (most RPGs came from Japan).

Genre	Percentage of Games
Action	11% (7)
Action-Adventure	19% (12)
Adventure	17% (11)
RPG	38% (24)
Simulation	11% (7)
Other	3% (2)

Table 3. Frequencies of Games with Trans-Related Content by Genre

Finally, Table 4 shows the frequency of the seven notable trends. These categories are not mutually exclusive, as many games had multiple trends appear within their content.

⁴ "Other" countries included Canada, France, Germany, and the UK.

Trend	Percentage of Games
Dysphoria/trapped in the wrong body	25% (16)
Physical transition	25% (16)
Mental illness	11% (7)
Killer	11% (7)
Trans shock	16% (10)
Trans reveal	11% (7)
Ambiguity	43% (27)

Table 4. Frequencies of Games with Trans-Related Content by Trends

Dysphoria/Physical Transition

Gender dysphoria and physical transition were two major trends found in this analysis. According to the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) Fifth Edition* (2013), gender dysphoria is designated as referring to “the distress that may accompany the incongruence between one’s experienced or expressed gender and one’s assigned gender” (p. 451). Physical transition refers to changes in one’s body that reflect one’s gender identity. These two trends deal with how video games portray trans minds and trans bodies and were thus combined to create the overarching trend of dysphoria/physical transition. Research on film and television also shows that gender dysphoria and physical transition are major trends in how trans narratives are told (Capuzza & Spencer, 2018; Cavalcante, 2013; GLAAD, 2019; GLAAD, 2020). Two characters from this analysis strongly illustrate how gender dysphoria and physical transition co-appear in some games portraying trans identities: Angof and Naoto Shirogane.

Though not the first example of dysphoria or physical transition trends, *RuneScape* (Jagex, 2001) seems to be the first game to include both at the same time. Specifically, Angof (seen in Figure 1), a non-playable character (NPC) who runs a crystal armor shop, is the earliest known example of dysphoria/physical transition. This is seen when the player reads one of Angof’s diary entries that says: “In many ways I am more myself than I’ve ever really been. No longer that little boy that felt trapped in a skin that was not his own. The form changing ability of the crystal certainly has its advantages.” If the player speaks to Angof about her marriage to a character named Maldwyn, she will also bring up her transness, saying: “This body was born, incorrectly, male. I changed that.” There is a sense of empowerment and authority in Angof’s story, as she feels happier following her physical transition.



Figure 1. Angof is an NPC in *RuneScape* (Jagex, 2001). Retrieved from <https://runescape.fandom.com/wiki/Angof>.

The next appearance of dysphoria/physical transition in a game is Naoto Shirogane (seen in Figure 2) from *Persona 4* (Atlus, 2008). Naoto is a playable character, typically described using the pronoun “she,” but is known to wear men’s clothing. In the game, Naoto’s “Shadow” (inner self) prepares Naoto for a “body-altering operation.” During the specific instance in which this “body-altering operation” takes place, the in-game protagonists battle Naoto’s “Shadow” to stop them⁵ from operating on the real Naoto. This frames physical transition for Naoto as the wrong option for them, as well as framing it as something that others can force on them rather than a personal choice. Transphobia is occurring in this instance as the idea of physical transition is portrayed as so dangerous and wrong that it becomes the enemy during an entire mission in the game. The game also portrays Naoto as fearing that no one will take them seriously as a female, which led to their struggles with gender. To be taken seriously, Naoto presented as male and allowed others to perceive them as such. Naoto, unlike Angof, is not explicitly trans, but their storyline echoes trans narratives of both dysphoria and physical transition.

⁵ I use “they/them” pronouns because of the lack of clarity regarding Naoto’s pronouns.



Figure 2. Naoto Shirogane is a playable character in *Persona 4* (Atlus, 2008). Retrieved from https://megamitensei.fandom.com/wiki/Naoto_Shirogane.

From these two characters, we can start to see how trans minds and trans bodies are portrayed in video games. Angof is an extremely rare case of explicit trans representation, but she and Naoto both follow a “wrong-body model” (Bettcher, 2014) that links transness to dysphoria and physical transition. If this model is the only one available for transness, it reinforces the assumption that transness must include this linkage. Figure 3 illustrates how this linkage occurs in games, showing their separate frequencies and how often they appear together.

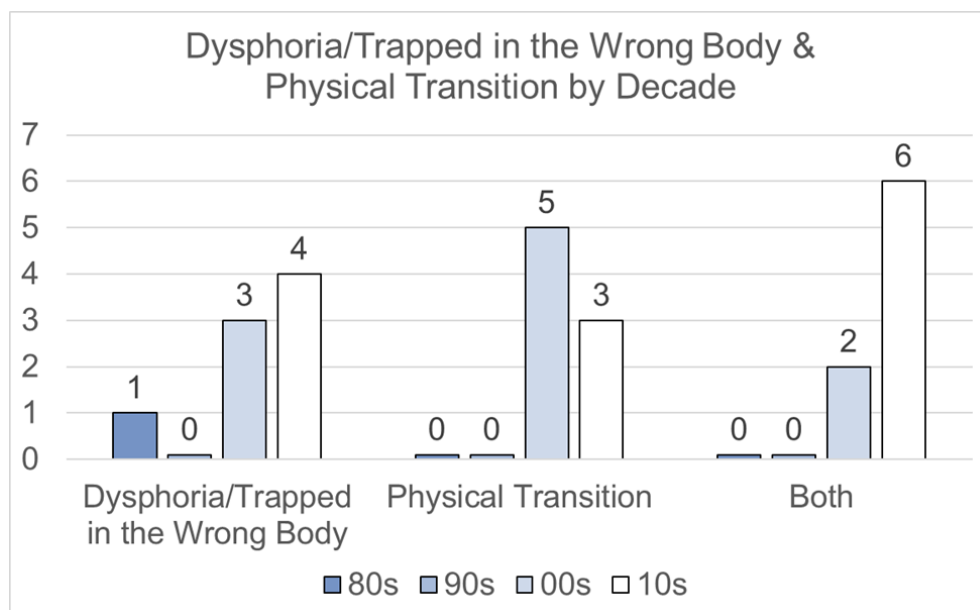


Figure 3. Dysphoria/Trapped in the Wrong Body Trend & Physical Transition Trend by Decade.

Longitudinally, narratives of dysphoria/physical transition have increased, appearing more frequently together in the 2010s. This tells us that games are possibly changing to include trans characters, but in ways that link transness to gender dysphoria and physical transition. This could be from the “wrong-body model” (Bettcher, 2014) becoming more prevalent over time. TV shows like *Ugly Betty* (Hayek et al., 2006) have representations through this model, with characters like Alexis Meade feeling “trapped in the wrong body.” We see this in film as well, with characters like Bree from *TransAmerica* (Tucker, 2005) who feel similarly. Although this may be validating for those who identify with the model, it can also reinforce transnormativity for those who do not. As narratives involving this model are much more represented in the media, they become the dominant narratives for what transness means.

Mentally Ill Killers

Trans characters as mentally ill and/or as killers were two other trends that often co-occurred in games. Mental illness refers to depression, anxiety, or any mental disorder or detriment to a character’s mental health. The killer trend refers to characters who kill other characters in-game or are depicted/described as such. Research on film also shows how transness has been linked with mental illness and killing (Benshoff, 1997; Halberstam, 2018). Two characters from this analysis illustrate this trend well: The Psycho and Alfred Ashford.

“The Psycho” (seen in Figure 4) is an enemy in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North, 2002). He dresses as a woman to get close to the band “Love Fist.” His appearance is stereotypical, as the player is supposed to see that he is a “man dressed in women’s clothes,” from the traditionally male-coded features he has contrasting with the women’s clothing he wears. The player is tasked with protecting the band and killing the Psycho. The Psycho kills a security guard and leaves a recorded message and bomb threat in Love Fist’s limousine. After this, the Psycho is never seen or mentioned again. While this gives no indication regarding the Psycho’s gender identity, the game is relating gender dysphoria and gender nonconformity to mental instability with its portrayal of what seems to be a man dressed in women’s clothes “going psycho.”



Figure 4. The Psycho is an enemy NPC in *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* (Rockstar North, 2002). Retrieved from https://gta.fandom.com/wiki/The_Psycho.

A similar portrayal of transness occurs with Alfred Ashford (seen in Figure 5), one of the antagonists in *Resident Evil – Code: Veronica* (Capcom Production Studio 4, 2000). In the game, Alfred helps his twin sister Alexia put herself in stasis so that she can conduct an experiment on herself. While she is gone, Alfred's mental stability deteriorates and he develops a second persona. This persona is also named Alexia, and he starts wearing makeup and women's clothing. On multiple occasions Alfred attempts to kill the protagonist, and during events before the main story, Alfred had killed multiple prisoners on the island on which the game takes place. This again links mental illness to both crossdressing and becoming a killer.



Figure 5. Alfred Ashford is a main antagonist in *Resident Evil – Code: Veronica* (Capcom Production Studio 4, 2000). Retrieved from https://residentevil.fandom.com/wiki/Alfred_Ashford,_7th_Earl_Ashford.

From these two characters, we can see how mental illness and being a killer are tied together specifically in cases of gender non-conformity. The Psycho's name and appearance show how *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City* characterizes a man who dresses in women's clothing as psychotic. The same can be said about Alfred's mental deterioration leading to cross-dressing and committing murder. As figure 6 shows, the two trends of mental illness and killers frequently appeared together in the 1990s-2000s. The fact that it is less common in the 2010s might be indicative of the growing desire for less harmful and more nuanced trans representations. However, it is important to note that portrayals of trans characters as mentally ill or as murderers are still frequent, but they occur less frequently in combination. Additionally, it is important to note that mental illness and killer are still seen as frequently but not in combination.

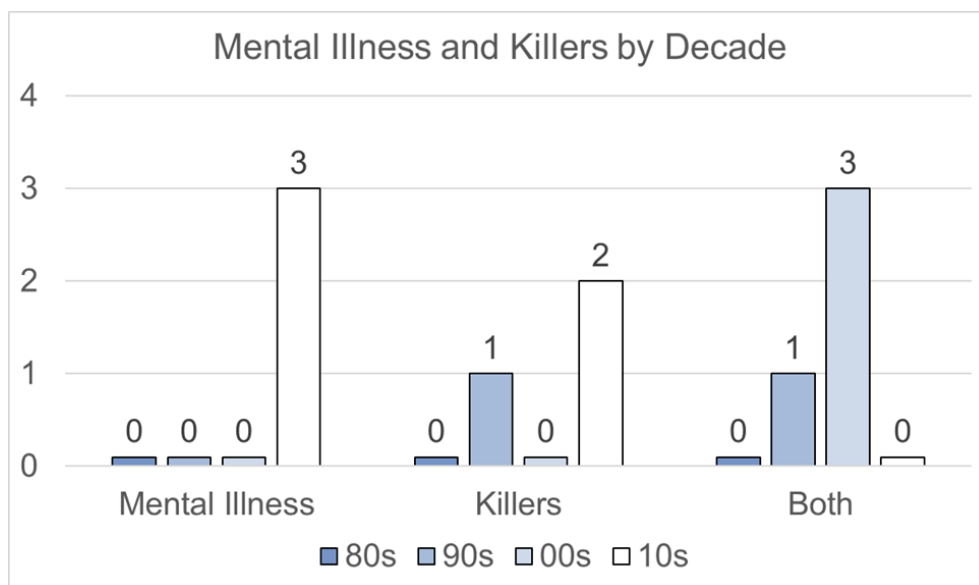


Figure 6. Mental Illness Trend and Killers Trend by Decade.

The linkage between trans identity, mental illness, and murder is unsurprising, as media has historically represented queer people as villains or monsters (Benshoff, 1997). Although not all trans people identify as queer, Halberstam (2018) states that trans people have been portrayed in film and television as dishonest, disorientated, and pathologically unstable. This can be seen in several films such as *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960), *Dressed to Kill* (Palma, 1980), and *The Silence of the Lambs* (Demme, 1991), where characters' dysphoria and gender non-conformity are linked to being murderous villains and monsters.

Trans Shock/Reveal

The use of trans shock or trans reveal to communicate transness to in-game characters and player audiences was also a trend in games. Trans shock refers to actual shock and panic around unexpected physiology or genitalia, reminiscent of real life "trans panic." "Trans panic" is a legal

defense applied in cases of assault, manslaughter, or murder of a trans individual after the assailant discovered different genitalia than expected. Trans reveal refers to moments where transness is revealed without elements of shock or panic. Thus, the two were combined to create the overarching trend, trans shock/reveal. Increasing attention to the issue of “trans panic” legal defenses, which only eight states have banned in the United States (Joseph & Croft, 2019), as well as the frequency of trans shock/reveal moments in media (Capuzza & Spencer, 2018), shows the importance of analyzing this trend in media. Two characters from this analysis illustrate this trend well: Shablee and Krem.

Illustrating trans shock, Shablee (seen in Figure 7) is an NPC in *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (Sierra Online, 1993). The protagonist, Larry, meets her for a midnight swim after completing the required quests. Unaware of her transness, Larry begins to have sex with Shablee. When the game shows an erect penis under her clothes, he discovers that Shablee is a trans woman and subsequently throws up. The “after” scene the next morning implies that Shablee raped Larry, as Larry seemed to be disgusted and not consenting after learning that Shablee was trans. Shablee is a reversal of other instances of trans shock in both this analysis and real life, as instead of becoming a victim to violence after the “trans shock” moment, she instead commits violence against the person she shocks. This reinforces the idea of trans people as deceivers (Billard, 2019), portraying them as hiding their transness to harm others.



Figure 7. *Trans Shock*. Shablee is an NPC in *Leisure Suit Larry 6* (Sierra Online, 1993). Retrieved from <https://leisuresuitlarry.fandom.com/wiki/Shablee>.

As for trans reveal, Krem (seen in Figure 8) is an NPC in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware 2014) who comes out to the protagonist as a trans man. He is the second explicitly trans character in the *Dragon Age* universe and the first major trans character to be in the series. Krem is also one of the first trans men to appear in any video game, according

to the LGBTQ Game Archive. In his coming out scene, other characters validate his gender identity, calling him a “real man” when he asks if he would be considered one in another culture. They also reprimand the player for transphobic dialogue responses, rejecting the notion that Krem is not a man because of the sex he was assigned at birth. Additionally, Krem has authority in this scene, as he chooses to come out after he makes jokes about binding breasts. However, the game has received criticism for having a cisgender female actor voice Krem (Hamilton, 2014). This is not unique though, as trans roles have a history of being played by non-trans actors (Halberstam, 2018).



Figure 8. Krem is an NPC in *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (Bioware, 2014). Retrieved from http://dragonage.wikia.com/wiki/Cremisius_Aclassi.

As seen with these two characters, the way transness is shown to both in-game characters and player audiences can either create moments of trans shock or trans reveal. Shablee shows how non-trans audiences perceive trans people as harmful deceivers, and Krem shows how games can respectfully portray transness. There seems to be a change in these portrayals of transness, as shown below in Figure 9 through frequencies of both the trans shock trend and the trans reveal trend by decade. The trans shock trend seems to have changed into the trans reveal trend in the 2010s, as it shows a steady decline from the 1990s–2010s, with the trans reveal trend first appearing in the 2010s.

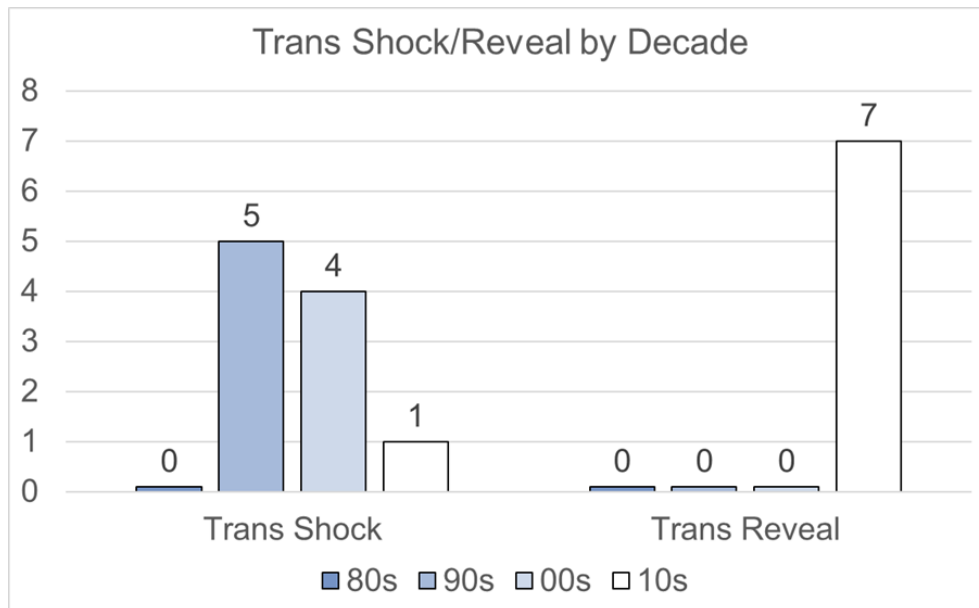


Figure 9. Trans Shock Trend and Trans Reveal Trend by Decade.

This trend could indicate a change in how developers and producers perceive trans people, or a change in what content is deemed acceptable. As many narratives of transness in media revolve around suffering and violence (Capuzza & Spencer, 2017; Cavalcante, 2013; Copier & Steinbock, 2018), these representations of trans shock changing into trans reveal possibly show an increased respect over time for the portrayals of trans identities in video games.

Ambiguity

The last and largest of the seven emergent trends was ambiguity, and it occurred frequently enough to be considered an overarching trend itself. It refers to gender ambiguity, specifically instances where characters' gender changed in localization or over time, are not explicitly stated, and/or are left open to interpretation. This does not connect with existing scholarship on other media, as most research has focused on explicit trans content (Capuzza & Spencer, 2018; Cavalcante, 2013; Copier & Steinbock, 2018). Two characters from this analysis illustrate this trend well: Poison and Zer0.

Poison (seen in Figure 10) is an enemy in the US version of *Final Fight* (Capcom, 1989). The character was originally supposed to be a woman but was described as a transvestite (someone who wears clothes of the opposite sex) because developers thought US players would not be comfortable hitting women in a game (Staff, 2007). This however changed over the years as producers made different comments on her gender identity (Crowder, 2009). She is not the only example of ambiguity regarding gender identity changing based on localization but is the earliest case available on the LGBTQ Game Archive. In 2011, Capcom stated that it would not take a stance on Poison's gender

identity (Plunkett, 2011) despite *Final Fight's* (Capcom, 1989) developer, Yoshinori Ono, saying in 2007: "In North America, Poison is officially a post-op transsexual. In Japan, she simply tucks her business away in order to look like a girl" (Siddiqui, 2013). Many lists of trans characters in video games online include Poison as a trans character despite the ambiguity regarding her gender identity (Smith, 2018; Villagomez, 2013).

This mystery around Poison's gender identity comes from changes in localization or over time, which led to a lack of specificity in how her gender/sex can be defined. However, this type of ambiguity appeared at least once every decade, so Poison is not an entirely unique case. Additionally, Stang (2019) and Lawrence (2018) have discussed a case like this with Sheik from *The Legend of Zelda* series. Without explicit confirmation of the gender identity of characters like Poison, what little trans representation there is in video games remains implicit. While not all trans people wish to disclose their gender labels, a back-and-forth of labels given by producers, designers, and developers shows a lack of care for the definitive stance on a character's identity.



Figure 10. Poison, an enemy in the US version of *Final Fight* (Capcom, 1989). Retrieved from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poison_\(Final_Fight\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Poison_(Final_Fight)).

Outside of changes in localization, ambiguity also manifests via comments, or lack of comments, from producers and game designers. One example is Zer0 (seen in Figure 11), a playable character in *Borderlands 2* (Gearbox Software, 2012) and *Borderlands 3* (Gearbox Software, 2019). He is referred to with "he/him" pronouns in the games but has been read as a non-binary character by fans due to his appearance and character seeming "mysterious" and lacking gendered information (doctorbrims, 2019; fuckyeahmonsterenbies, 2015). The CEO of Gearbox Software, Randy Pitchford, also referred to Zer0 using gender neutral pronouns on a panel at PAX 2014 (Astewir, 2014).

Without any official confirmation about Zer0's gender, he remains a very ambiguous character.

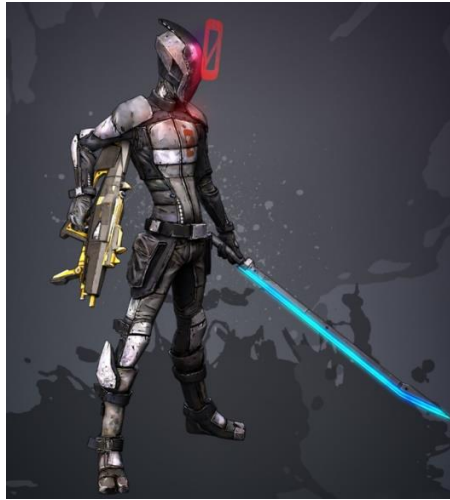


Figure 11. Zer0, a playable character in *Borderlands 2* (Gearbox Software, 2012) and *Borderlands 3* (Gearbox Software, 2019). Retrieved from <http://borderlands.wikia.com/wiki/Zer0>.

From these two characters, we see how games can be ambiguous when it comes to trans content. Poison shows the importance of looking at the context of localization, and both she and Zer0 show the importance of looking at producer and game designer comments to gain further context. Both also reveal how ambiguity most often shows up when characters are described as "mysterious" or left to interpretation. Because of changes in localization, ambiguity changes based on country, as seen with frequencies of Ambiguity by Country in Figure 12. Ambiguity is more prevalent in Japan than it is in any other country in this analysis.

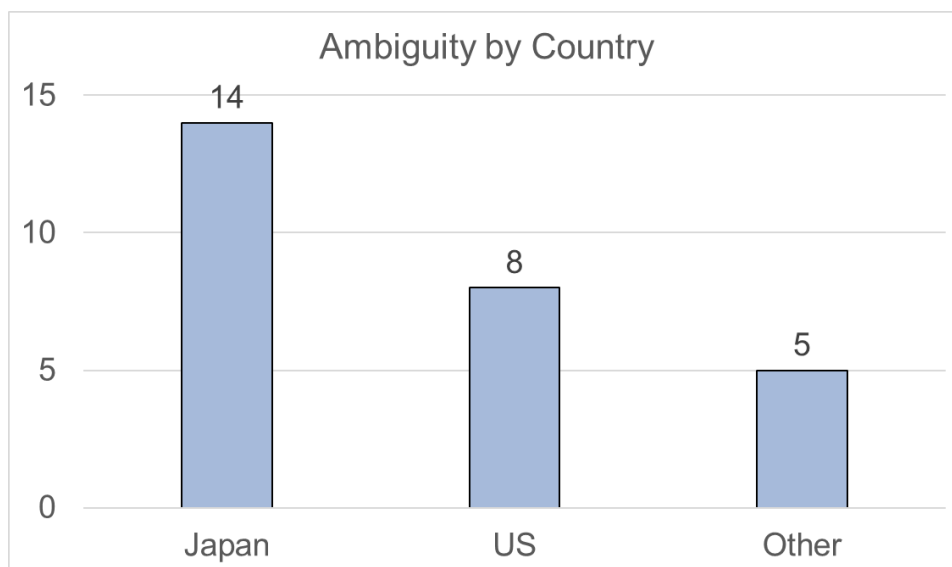


Figure 12. Ambiguity Trend by Country.

Being a Westerner and unable to analyze the Japanese texts of certain games due to language barrier, my analysis comes from a limited Anglophone and Western perspective. However, given that ambiguity in games has been understudied in Western game studies and Western media studies, this study contributes to an ongoing and growing conversation about gender ambiguity in games and other media.

Areas for future research

Beyond the characters I mention throughout this study, there are other important aspects of trans representation in video games that deserve attention. Sender's (2012) concentric circle model of media production shows how queer representation within media changes depending on the media's positionality within television and film production. This means that in the center, media is well-funded and representations are homogenized/marketable to a general demographic (such as with big budget production companies like Walt Disney Studios). As one heads outward to the margins and then peripheries, they encounter media that is less professional and less funded, resulting in representations that are more niche and speak to more realistic narratives (Sender, 2012). Although Sender's model only speaks on film and television, this can be translated to video games. Within this analysis, most games fell within the center (i.e., being from AAA game production studios). This could be due to the limited sample, as it is hard to know the full scope of games within and outside of the center.

Also, only four games had narratives centering trans perspectives: *Dys4ia* (Anthropy, 2012a), *Ohmygod Are You Alright?* (Anthropy, 2015), *Tranxiety* (Jayne, 2015), and *The Missing: J.J. Macfield and the Island of Memories* (White Owls Inc., 2018). The first three were from the peripheries and the last from the center. However, according to comments from SWERY, *The Missing's* producer, the trans narrative is "left to interpretation" (Hashimoto, 2018). The three periphery games with trans perspectives were all self-published on itch.io. Although they are a small part of this sample, they show how new media give audiences the opportunity to retell dominant narratives; trans creators can create the trans content they want to see (Pullen & Cooper, 2010; Shaw, 2014).

Another important aspect to analyze outside of specific characters is gender customization options. Many have heralded games like the *Animal Crossing* series for its gender customization options that allow players to express gender in non-normative ways that can relate to identity (Richardson, 2019; Stark, 2019). These new options are similar to how video games include LGB relationship options as a way to include queer content without making it overt or mandatory (Shaw, 2009). Although they may seem progressive, they can be easily included without causing much of a stir in gaming communities.

Finally, another important aspect to analyze is voice acting. This study found that in 11 out of 63 games, trans-identified or trans-coded characters had voice actors of different genders. As said before with Krem from *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (BioWare, 2014), very little research has been done on this, but it appeared often enough in this analysis to show that it is notably present in video games.

Conclusion

This project found that trans representation in video games differs across decade of release and country of origin. By decade, narratives of dysphoria and physical transition have become more prevalent, indicating a possible linkage between those two trends in games. This linkage, while beneficial for those who identify with a medical or physical depiction of transness, harms those who do not. Trans people who do not experience dysphoria and do not want to or are unable to physically transition are erased, as the assumption becomes that to be trans, one must experience dysphoria and physically transition. Narratives of trans people being mentally ill killers seemed to have peaked in the 2000s, indicating a departure from the linkage of transness and dysphoria with mental illness and instability. This departure seems to also indicate that video games are catching up with real-life understandings of transness, as the *DSM-5* renamed gender identity disorder to gender dysphoria in 2013, removing the stigma associated with the term "disorder." Also, the World Health Organization declassified "transsexualism" as a disease in 2018. Narratives of trans shock are progressively changing into narratives of trans reveal. Scenes like *Leisure Suit Larry 6: Shape Up or Slip Out's* (Sierra Online, 1993) trans shock with Shablee depicted trans people as deceivers, but as games create more scenes like Krem's trans reveal, deception as a trans stereotype starts to disappear.

By country, trans content in Japanese games seems to be more ambiguous than in games from other regions, indicating a variance in how different regions portray gender identity. This could also be due to the English bias in this project and the LGBTQ Game Archive, but still points towards an avenue of games and media research that has been understudied.

The field of queer game studies is continually growing, as publication after publication delves deeper into the complexity and intersections of queer representation in video games. Analyses of games and the queer social contexts of play (Harper, Adams, & Taylor, 2018), the queer potential of video games (Ruberg, 2019), and LGBTQ game content, players, and designers (Ruberg, 2020; Ruberg & Shaw, 2017) among others add to the literature. Yet, much of this work does not address transgender representation specifically or holistically. As other media have come to analyze transness both alongside sexuality and on its own, game studies should as well. Scholars have considered video games as a unique art form and medium (e.g., Gee, 2006; Juul, 2013; Squire,

2011), but in terms of trans representation, this study has revealed that games are not too different from film and television.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Dr. Adrienne Shaw from Temple University for her mentorship while conducting this research and writing this paper. I would also like to thank the Diamond Research Scholars program at Temple University for funding this research, as well as Refiguring Innovation in Games for funding me to work for the LGBTQ Game Archive. Thank you to Kristina DeVoe for guiding me during my literature review process. Finally, thank you to my loving and supportive husband, Dr. Russell Webster from Penn State University, Abington Campus, for being my emotional support system every step of the way.

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